

Opinions That Count

How Swing Voters in Congress View Global Population Issues

Many in the population community believe that current demographic research has too little impact on national policy in such areas as foreign relations, development, and family planning issues. One common argument holds that policy-relevant findings are usually not disseminated in the ways that are most useful to senior decision-makers. Another assumes that congressional attitudes on these issues are so polarized—and recent Congresses have been so focused on domestic issues and national defense—that research on global population issues is unlikely to influence U.S. legislation no matter how that research is delivered.

Yet a recent RAND study reveals that the potential for demographic research to influence congressional decisions is larger than many believe. Results from in-depth, elite interviews suggest that key members of Congress would be receptive to research-based information on population trends and its implications for relevant policy areas. This group, which seems likely to have considerable influence on population-related votes,

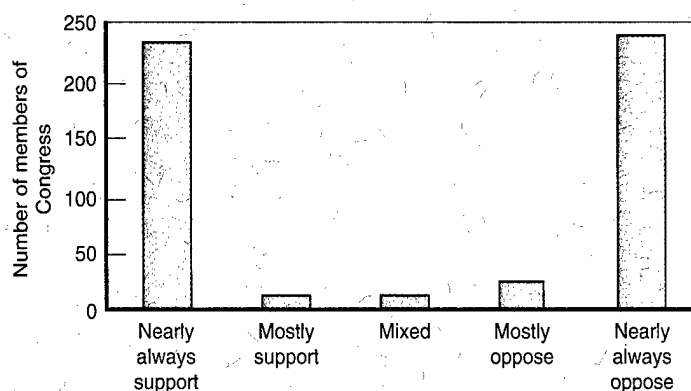
- generally believes that world population growth is a problem, though not an urgent one;
- is open to providing U.S. funding for development and population-related programs, such as international family planning; and
- would welcome concise, objective information tightly focused on the most policy-relevant topics.

THE EXCLUDED MIDDLE

The study was conducted as part of *Population Matters*, a RAND project to make demographic research more useful to policy audiences worldwide. Like all RAND work, the project does not advocate any particular

policy solution, but seeks to inform policy debate with scientific information. Because Congress is such an important audience in this arena, a key task for *Population Matters* is to understand what demographic information Congress will value and how members prefer to have it delivered. (A parallel effort analyzed the attitudes and information needs of the U.S. public.¹)

The study of Congress focused on the members who might be expected to most value research-based information on demographic issues: those who do not regularly vote along ideological lines either for or against population-related measures. Approximately 90 percent of Congress consistently votes either to support or oppose such legislation. The 10 percent remaining—the swing vote on population issues, depicted in the three short bars in the figure—is likely to determine whether these measures pass or fail.



Source: Informal coalition of 30 organizations that track population issues on a regular basis.

Voting Record on Foreign Relations and Population Assistance

To understand how this key group of legislators views demographic issues, what information they would value, and how it could best reach them, the research team conducted detailed interviews. Because such interviews are time intensive, they were conducted with legislative directors rather than members of Congress themselves. These senior policy advisors are uniquely positioned to know and understand the views of legislators on important issues and routinely speak on their behalf.

By definition, then, these interview responses do not represent the attitudes and information needs of all current members of Congress. They do, however, provide insight into the attitudes, knowledge, and behavior of the legislators who appear most likely to use research-based information in forming judgments on global population policy issues.

KEY CONGRESSIONAL ATTITUDES

Swing voters in Congress believe that the United States should continue to play a leading role in international affairs. There is a widespread perception that the Congresses of the 1990s were preoccupied with domestic issues—and that this focus reflects voter priorities. Yet most of the respondents reported that the members they represent believe in a strong leadership role for the United States in world affairs. (And the *Population Matters* survey of the American public found that popular support of foreign economic assistance is greater than many—including congressional respondents—may assume; current levels, in fact, represent a 24-year high.²) The legislative directors interviewed here generally argued that this role is required by the nation's responsibility as a superpower and by its need to protect American interests (including trade, economic, and environmental interests as well as national security). Their responses seemed to reflect a general shift in thinking from unilateral approaches to global partnerships. Several stressed the need for more multi-lateral approaches based on international cooperation and on multinational institutions—except in the area of national security.

Nearly unanimous support was expressed for U.S. support of voluntary family planning. The legislative directors report that these members of Congress see links between population growth and national security, the environment, child health, and other issues. They also see voluntary family planning programs as an appropriate way to address growth rates in developing countries. This judgment did not vary by party, length of time in office, position on abortion, or position on other population-related issues. Respondents frequently noted concern, however, that such programs need to be culturally appropriate, suggesting that Congress would benefit from

greater awareness of the research showing how family planning and related health programs can be successfully adapted to local contexts.

Congressional attitudes toward international family planning and abortion are not necessarily parallel.

Although the political importance and sensitivity of the abortion issue may overshadow other considerations in congressional debate over population measures, the swing voters who are most likely to oppose population measures actually tend to support policies that make contraception available but not abortion. Many who tended to oppose foreign assistance for family planning volunteered that the reason they opposed such measures was their concern that funds might be used toward abortion. Therefore, keeping the discussion of international family planning separate from any discussion of abortion is likely to produce policies that more accurately reflect these members' attitudes.

Though generally well-informed, legislative directors lack knowledge on some specific issues. While generally supporting U.S. funding for population assistance to developing nations, the legislative directors generally were unaware of the magnitude of such assistance currently provided by the U.S. relative to other types of foreign aid. (Only 4 percent of U.S. development assistance goes to family planning; upon hearing this figure, more than half the respondents reported that the members of Congress who employ them would consider it too little.) Likewise, there was some confusion surrounding demographic concepts such as population momentum. (This is the phenomenon of populations continuing to grow even as fertility falls. Respondents seemed surprised to learn that even if women immediately began having just two children each, on average, global population would still grow from 6 billion to more than 8 billion before stabilizing.)

Congressional decisionmakers would welcome concise, factual information, along with policy implications, on population-related topics. Factors other than research influence policy on population issues. Yet at least among this group in Congress, objective research is valued—if it can be readily connected to the policy debate. Making such a ready connection requires that the information be focused on policy-relevant issues as well as presented in an efficient format. (Short, crisp documents supported by white papers that have short, highly memorable overviews are widely agreed to be most useful to members of Congress.) According to these legislative directors, members of this key congressional group would especially value tightly focused research findings that provide

- clear explanations of complex demographic concepts, such as population momentum;

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- basic information on population assistance programs, e.g., the magnitude of population assistance relative to other types of foreign aid;
- historical information on these programs, especially on their ability to provide culturally appropriate services;
- in-depth analysis of their constituents' views on population issues; and
- an empirical view of the relationship between family planning programs and abortion.

In response to these results, *Population Matters* has examined the latter three issues in greater detail. Our survey of the American public sought to understand how the public views international assistance and global popula-

tion issues (see footnote 1 for citation). We are also examining the history and range of approaches used by family planning programs to adapt to local conditions and culture and are synthesizing the scientific literature on the relationship between the availability of family planning and the incidence of abortion.

¹ Results are presented in David M. Adamson, Nancy Belden, Julie DaVanzo, and Sally Patterson, *How Americans View World Population Issues: A Survey of Public Opinion* (RAND MR-1114, 2000) and a related policy brief, *Behind the Numbers: How the American Public Views Global Population Issues*, RB-5037. Both are available free from *Population Matters*; see endnote for details on ordering.

² *How Americans View World Population Issues*, 14.

RAND policy briefs summarize research that has been more fully documented elsewhere. This policy brief describes work done for the Population Matters project of RAND's Labor and Population Program and documented in How Does Congress Approach Population and Family Planning Issues? Results of Qualitative Interviews with Legislative Directors by Sally Patterson and David M. Adamson, RAND MR-1048-WFHF/RF/UNFPA, 1999, 46 pp., ISBN: 0-8330-2704-2. Population Matters is sponsored by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the David and Lucille Packard Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation. Population Matters publications and other project information are available at <http://www.rand.org/popmatters>. All RAND publications are available from RAND Distribution Services, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138 (Telephone: 310-451-7002; FAX: 310-451-6915; email: order@rand.org; or the Web: <http://www.rand.org/publications/ordering.html>). RAND® is a registered trademark. RAND is a nonprofit institution that seeks to improve public policy through research and analysis; its publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of its research sponsors.

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